

Davor Kovačić, *Oružništvo Nezavisne Države Hrvatske. Redarstveno tijelo i vojna postrojba 1941.-1945.* [The Gendarmerie of the Independent State of Croatia. Police Body and Military Unit from 1941 to 1945] (Zagreb: Despot infinitus d. o. o. and Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2014)



Summary

The constabulary or the gendarmerie is the auxiliary corps that serves to maintain public order and safety. The constabulary is a military unit responsible for carrying out police tasks, although some may perform military tasks, and often serve to perform humanitarian missions (example; search and rescue). Depending on the countries, the constabulary may be under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Defense or the Ministry of Interior, or under the authority of both ministries. In some countries the term used for the constabulary is military police; military police, however, have the power to deal only with military personnel. The constabulary is the main link between the gendarmerie and the army, specifically well trained for situations that exceed the capabilities of police, but still do not justify the use of the army. Unlike the police who are usually confined within cities, the constabularies tend to serve in smaller towns and in the country side.

The constabulary in the Banovina of Croatia acted within the Royal Hungarian Croatian – Slavonian Constabulary Command, which had headquarters in Zagreb, and the official language of the Croatian Constabulary was Croatian. The Constabulary in Dalmatia and Istria remained within the Imperial - Royal Constabulary after the Austro - Hungarian compromise. This situation essentially held up until the dissolution of the Austro - Hungarian Empire in 1918.

The Yugoslav gendarmerie reflected Serbian domination, and former members of the Croatian Constabulary were few and neglected. The gendarmerie of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was infamous for conducting a regime of terror. With the establishment of the Croatian Banovina unsuccessful personnel changes were taken to cease the gendarmerie from being a source of state repression in Croatia. The relationship between local (Croatian) government and members of the gendarmerie was often tense and full of controversy and conflict. Regulation of Constabulary Croatian Banovina was signed on 5 April 1941; but soon the Axis powers attack on Yugoslavia began and this regulation as well as other decisions remained only formal. However, this regulation ended up being the foundation of the initial organization of the Constabulary in the newly established Independent State of Croatia (NDH).

With the establishment of the new government, the NDH, the constabulary assumed a more important role and served as one of the pillars of the new regime. The newly established constabulary of the NDH intentionally sought to have nothing in common with the work of the constabulary of former Yugoslavia. It was emphasized that the constabulary of the NDH must work for the benefit of the Croatian state, the Croatian people, and particularly the Croatian peasantry. However, it soon became clear to the Ustaša authorities that the constabulary is not sufficiently reliable. With the establishment of the NDH, the majority of the constabulary was composed of former Yugoslav gendarmes, and initially part of the Serbian population of Croatia did feel hostile towards the constabularies. In numerous statements the constabulary has reported about the arbitrariness of the Ustaša which often worsened the security situation in villages and small towns. Soon the NDH authorities “cleansed” the constabulary and filled it with its own people. In fact, a number of former Austro-Hungarian and constabulary officers were activated who did not serve in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia or were retired. Most Serbs or Orthodox Christians who were gendarmes for the former Yugoslavia were released, but there were some individuals who were retained in service, in order to prevent abuse of gendarmerie Serbs or Orthodoxes, and those who have committed crimes were captured and put on trial.

For the purpose of enhancing the constabulary, the Minister of the Home Guard could, if necessary, at the proposal of the Supreme Command of the Constabulary, temporarily assign to the constabulary the required number of Croatia Home Guard soldiers. To fill up the missing ranks in the constabulary advertisements for recruitment were sent out in order to get young citizens to join up. Constabulary training school lasted six months. Upon graduation, future constabularies are referred to the constabulary station to be admitted into practical service. When the recruit proved his physical, moral, and mental ability and after one-year of experimental service in the constabulary he could be admitted as a permanent constabulary.

Establishment and organization of the constabulary service in Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially in eastern Bosnia, was harder to carry out than on Croatian territory, and attacks on the Constabulary were frequent in the early months of the establishment of the NDH. These attacks did not only take place in Bosnia and Herzegovina but also occurred on Croatian territory, especially in areas with a Serb majority. During the spring and summer of 1941 the constabulary tried to calm the situation in the regions populated predominantly by Serbs. The constabulary sought to prevent violence and calm the frightened population that increasingly fled into the woods, but often these attempts were unsuccessful.

Legal provisions in August 1941 formally established the Constabulary of the NDH assigned to maintain public order, public, personal, and property safety. The Constabulary of the NDH was a regimented organization which carried out mainly police work, but due to the war situation at times they were ordered fight on the ground. The main objective was to adapt the constabulary to the war situation and transform them into one of the carriers of the regime. However, these plans were not realized.

The whole organization of the Constabulary of the NDH was strictly centralized. Service around the constabulary was led by the Supreme Commander of the Constabulary who was appointed by the Poglavnik from the class of constabulary officers at the proposal of the Minister of the Croatian Home Guard. After the establishment of the NDH, the NDH Constabulary Commander was appointed Constabulary General Milan Mizler.

In the process of maintaining public order and security the constabulary was subordinated to the political - administrative fields, but it is located within the Home Guard and constituted a part of the armed forces of the NDH. In the event of war the constabulary could, without prejudice to public safety, be used for very specific military purposes, which are established as follows: "ordering administrative institutions and regulations for the Battle Field Constabulary Croatian Home Guard". The Ministry of Home Guard, along with the Ministry of Interior (MUP) of the NDH issued provisions and instructions in regard to the maintenance of public security measures. The constabulary has a duty to maintain public order, peace and security, from which it follows that it was obligated to defend all persons, without distinction of class and gender. It was mandatory to prevent all illegal acts and to make sure law offenders were brought to lawful punishment. Cases relating to public order and safety would be delivered to MUP via the RAVSIGUR, and political subjects would get sent to MUP and Command UNS. Items on military matters were sent to the Ministry of Home Guard.

The constabulary did not act as an organ of the administrative authorities because the Ustaša police took over this duty and the constabulary which was not considered reliable was only allowed to register individual events. The constabulary did not participate in the establishment, neither monitoring nor defending assembly or labor camps, or concentration in the NDH that belonged to the jurisdiction of the UNS.

Calls that the courts and the state prosecutor's office brought to the constabulary typically demanded the execution of a service that is concerned with fines in certain cases. In these cases, the call could refer to official business, such as arresting someone, etc. It could be of a general nature such as to find witnesses to a specific event. The President of the Court, the Attorney General, a district judge or his deputy and the investigating judge had the right to order the constabulary to investigate traces of offenses or to investigate public opinion about them. It was required of constabularies to request an escort to take the detainees and convicts. In order to keep the detainees and conduct services at court hearings constabularies were to be used only in case of emergency and when dealing with dangerous criminals.

Due to the increase of the National Liberation Army (Partisans) in the remaining area of the NDH, there was more disorganization and instability. During partisan attacks on constabulary stations, constabularies were often captured, and part of them crossed over to the Partisans. In addition, the constabulary was composed of officers and non-commissioned officers who were sympathetic to partisans. From the spring 1942 constabulary command began sending mailers about the "disappearance" of constabularies and home guardsmen and their joining "communist gangs". These mailers were often sent out, and the number of fugitives in the Partisans was increasing. This

has contributed to and influenced the government attempts to direct the NDH organized constabulary to strengthen the regime.

From the middle of 1942 the constabulary was separated from the Home Guard and included in the Ustaša army; and when it came to matters of maintenance of public order and peace, then it was directly subordinated to the Ministry of the Interior (MUP). The government of the NDH was dissatisfied with the holdings of the Home Guard and this resulted in the constabulary being directly linked to the Ustaša organization, or Ustaša army. Warlord S. Kvaternik in June 1942 ordered that the constabulary be converted into the composition Ustaša army. The constabulary was claimed by the Ustaša and did not do what the Ustaša demanded of them, and as a consequence, arguments arose between members of the constabulary and the Ustaša movement and Ustaša troops.

In August 1942 Vilko Pečnikar, Ustaša colonel, was appointed commander of the constabulary. Upon his arrival to commander, the name Supreme Command Constabulary was changed to the Main Command Constabulary. Pečnikar established the Central Constabulary School in Bjelovar, which had about 2,000 attendees. The constabulary wings arose out of the six constabulary regiments with the purpose of public order and safety, compliance with laws and regulations and to conduct intelligence service through its regional headquarters.

At the beginning of 1944 the constabulary was separated from the Ministry of the Armed Forces and was placed directly under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Interior (MUP).

The NDH found itself in increasingly difficult circumstances due to increasingly successful Partisan movements and as a result had to make changes to the constabulary. Due to a booming and massive development of the partisan movement, the effectiveness of the constabulary decreased, as did the efficiency of all military and police institutions of the NDH.

The constabularies were usually housed in inadequate buildings. During the entirety of the NDH the food and equipment the constabularies received was weak and insufficient and the impression the constabularies received was that they were forgotten by the government of the NDH. Despite this situation, mood and morale in constabulary units, particularly in comparison with the Home Guard of NDH was generally at a high level.

Despite the demonstrated courage and dedication in the fight against the Partisans and the Chetniks, constabularies compared with the Home Guard often did not receive awards and decorations. The reason was that the constabulary commanders lightly crossed the achievement of their subordinates and did not deliver the necessary proposals for the praise and accolades in a timely manner.

The Italian occupation zone establishment and operation of the constabulary proceeded slowly and with difficulty because it interfered with the Italian occupation authorities practically until the capitulation in September 1943.

Deployment of the Italian Carabinieri police station in the NDH was the first step in taking over the Italian surveillance in the coastal zone. The Italians in different ways and violent measures precluded the operation. Italians occupied the police stations, but then still demanded that the constabularies cooperate with them. One of the first measures that the Italians conducted was the confiscation of weapons from the constabulary station. Soon this trend occurred in all constabulary stations in the coastal zone, and constabularies were removed from the barracks. NDH authorities, district authorities, municipal authorities, police stations in the Italian second occupation zone carried out mainly secondary duties. Reports of constabulary confirmed the reoccupation and expropriation of Croatian institutions. The constabulary had information on the military organization of Serbs in the annexed areas where the Italian authorities did not oppose the Serbs. Deteriorating relations between NDH authorities and the Kingdom of Italy were reflected on the relationship of the constabulary and the Italian army. Because of this relationship with the Italians the constabulary of the NDH was outraged, and it came to incidents with members of the Italian army, sometimes with tragic endings.

After the capitulation of Italy in September 1943 the 7th Police Regiment was established in Split from the former responding regions. After the Italian capitulation, the NDH army managed to keep the crew and Croatian authorities in most cities, but now only with the direct help of German military units. The Germans from the beginning of October 1942 to April 1943 began taking all the power in the NDH. The main command of the constabulary in late May 1943 announced to subordinated constabulary units the establishment of a German police organization made up of Croats and Germans. The main Constabulary headquarters commanded by the constabulary is obliged to cooperate with the German police organization. Since then the Croatian armed forces, especially the constabulary and the Home Guard lose independence and become extra, poorly equipped army and through acquisition. The constabulary has almost marginalized at the arrival and establishment of the SS police. Because they thought the constabulary is not reliable enough and is prone to crossing over to the Partisans, the Germans monitored them. The constabulary has reported that the Croatian people after the departure of the Italians and the arrival of the German army and the establishment of the Croatian authorities in the coastal areas expected to have security and protection. However, it began and continued to be all the more blatant to people that the German military authorities were willing to arrest and send individuals to work camps.

In the history of the constabulary of the NDH, and thus the constabulary in Croatia, the last provision came in 16 August 1944, and it caused the constabulary to no longer be a part of the armed unit of the Ustaša army and instead to become a part of the armed forces of the NDH.

Translated by Tin Udovičić